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ABSTRACT

Intended for use by instructors of public relations courses, this paper discusses teaching methods that can be used to demonstrate to students how much of the news involves events that are carefully planned by public relations practitioners and some of the techniques the practitioners use to create these events. The paper describes in detail Daniel Boorstin's concept of "pseudo-events"--experiences that are planned, often "hyped," and evaluated for success by how much news media coverage they receive. It examines the relationship between pseudo-events and planned media events, and then describes an assignment given to students in which they prepared an analysis of a pseudo-event covered by the media. In conclusion, the paper discusses some of the societal implications of the proliferation of pseudo-events. (FL)

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Public Relations

MEDIA RELATIONS: THE PLANNED EVENT

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ABSTRACT

MEDIA RELATIONS: THE PLANNED EVENT

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This paper discusses the teaching methods used to introduce public relations students to planning the media event. It describes in detail Daniel Boorstin's concept of a "pseudo-event," lists the characteristics of a pseudo-event, develops the relationship between pseudo-events and planned media events and summarizes the assignment given to students related to this concept. Lastly, this paper discusses some of the societal implications of the proliferation of pseudo-events.

MEDIA RELATIONS: THE PLANNED EVENT

The following newspaper stories, accompanied by photos, were published in recent months: Nancy Reagan appeared at the Republican National Presidential Campaign Headquarters, a rare public political appearance for her. It happened to be the day after her husband declared his intent to run again. The photo showed her outside the headquarters buying a campaign button from a vendor.

A California Assemblywoman held a news conference to declare that persons who take care of zoo animals make more money than persons who care for elderly humans. The site of the news conference was the city zoo in the state capital. She also announced she was introducing a series of bills which would attempt to find additional money for caring for the elderly.

Mayor Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco and several other area celebrities recently permitted themselves to be blindfolded and led around the city of San Francisco on a "blindwalk." This event was part of an effort to raise money for a non-profit organization that provides services for the visually impaired in northern California.

These are not isolated examples of unusual news stories. Rather, they are relatively common examples of "intelligent relating to the press."[1]

Planning is the cornerstone to successful public relations efforts, and this is especially true when it comes to working with news media personnel. Practitioners want to maximize the likelihood of having their publicity used as news by reporters because of the increased credibility of the message and because it is less expensive than buying equivalent advertising time and space.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the teaching methods used to demonstrate to public relations students how much of the news involves events that are carefully planned by public relations practitioners, usually for the sole purpose of being reported as news, and some of the techniques used to plan and create these events. This paper will also discuss the implications of this phenomenon for society. This content is currently used in an introductory public-relations principles course, but could be adapted easily to other public relations courses or used in a mass-media curriculum.

Over twenty years ago, Daniel Boorstin wrote in his book, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America: "The power to make a reportable event is thus the power to make experience."[2] He also quoted Edward Bernays: "'The counsel on public relations not only knows what news value is, but knowing it, he is in a position to make news happen. He is a creator of events.'"[3]

Boorstin used the term, "pseudo-event," to describe the type of experience which is planned, often "hyped," and is evaluated for success on how much news media coverage the event receives. A pseudo-event differs from other planned events, often which are entertaining and fun to participate in, because publicity events are designed to be reported.

Boorstin suggested pseudo-events often meet the following set of characteristics:

1. A pseudo-event is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted or incited it.

2. A pseudo-event is planted primarily, though not always exclusively, for the immediate purpose of being reported or being reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported.

3. A pseudo-event's relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous; that is, what were the real motives behind the event? Its appeal arises largely from this very ambiguity.

4. Usually it is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, by saying an event is "distinguished" or the "greatest," it is intended to be perceived as such.

5. Pseudo-events are designed to be dramatic, and can be planned to be more exciting, suspenseful and fun to watch than reality.

6. Pseudo-events, being planned for dissemination to the news media, are easier to report. Participants in the event are selected for their newsworthiness and dramatic interest or appeal.

7. Pseudo-events can be repeated at will, and thus their impression can be reinforced.

8. Pseudo-events cost money to create; hence, somebody has an interest in advertising and extolling them as events worth covering as news or as events worth attending or watching.

9. Pseudo-events are planned for intelligibility and to be comfortable to watch or attend.

10. Pseudo-events are designed to sociable, conversable and convenient to watch or attend.

My first educational objective related to this concept is to get public relations students to read and watch the mass media. They are asked to find one example of a pseudo-event that was covered as news for use in the following assignment:

ANALYSIS OF A PSEUDO-EVENT:

Cite a pseudo-event, using Boorstin's definition, that was covered as news (either inclose a clipping of the news story or describe the broadcast).

Analyze the event in terms of how many pseudo-event characteristics the event actually had exhibited; also describe the purpose(s) of the event and elements that involved planning.

Discuss how successful the event was, in terms of the apparent purpose (remember Boorstin's definition of "success" for a pseudo-event). If you believe it was not very successful, suggest ways that this particular pseudo-event could have been improved.

You should also discuss, if relevant, any celebrities involved in this event and their role.

The first two chapters of The Image... are placed on reserve at the library to supplement the in-class introduction to pseudo-events and working with the media for publicity purposes. In addition, students are shown the videotape, "Land of Hype and Glory," an NBC study by Ed Newman of a variety of efforts to get successful publicity.[1] (Rental information is in footnote.)

We often analyze one current example of pseudo-event in class before students undertake the assignment. For example, let's look at the news story about Nancy Reagan's visit to the campaign headquarters to illustrate how many of Boorstin's pseudo-event characteristics it exhibits:

1. This was carefully planned.

2. It clearly was designed primarily for the purpose of being reported as news and it was extremely successful in achieving that goal.

3. The news story even mentioned the ambiguity involved in this situation; i.e., why was Nancy doing this, since she rarely participates in political events?

4. This event involved self-fulfilling prophecy to the degree that news personnel were told ahead of time that a "newsworthy" event would occur involving Nancy.

5. Watching Nancy buy a campaign button from a vendor and visit campaign headquarters was not great drama, but it was unusual, possibly interesting and maybe even fun for the journalists to cover.

6. It was certainly easy for the journalists to cover -- in fact, transportation had been arranged for them; Nancy also represents a participant with built-in news value.

7. Despite Nancy's professed reluctance to participate in such events, this could and probably will be repeated (especially since this occasion received so much media attention).

8 & 9. This event certainly cost money to produce, as just arranging transportation for all the journalists would be expensive; money was also spent on preparing background materials, news releases, coffee and donuts and other materials used to make the journalists comfortable and to make the story easy to report.

10. Judging from the positive reporting, the event apparently was sociable, conversable and convenient to watch.

Initially, students are often dubvious about how easy it might be to find

an example of a pseudo-event in the mass media. It is not long after the lecture which senstizes them to the presence of pseudo-events, however, before they begin stopping by the office to show their example to analyze for the assignment. This meets the first goal of getting students to watch or read the news media. Anecdotal evidence from students suggests they become much more critical consumers of the news media after this assignment.

The written assignment is limited to four pages, typed and doubled-spaced. Grades are based are based on how well students discuss the assigned points of analysis and also reflect grammar and spelling errors.

When the assignment is returned to students, we discuss examples which illustrate planning of events such as news conferences or other publicity events. This also involves a discussion of the need for news values in events designed to be reported by the news media. Occasionally, students put this information to work immediately in their own publicity efforts. One specific example involved three students who were co-chairpersons of the publicity committee for the campus "Black Awareness Week." Previously inexperienced in planning publicity events, they made every effort to increase the number of pseudo-event characteristics for "Black Awareness Week" events (such as increasing the drama involved, making the events more fun to watch and more convenient for reporters to attend and inviting better-known "celebrities" to attend). Their efforts paid off, as their events received more local media coverage and had higher attendance than in previous years.

The second educational objective of this assignment is to make students more aware of the possible effects of staging pseudo-events in our society. Boorstin's primary criticism was that pseudo-events tend to lead persons toward extravagent expectations of what the world holds and of our power to shape the

world. These expectations may lead us to demand that the "news" be exciting, dramatic and interesting. We also may come to expect our lives to match that level of excitement, which can only lead to disappointment.

In addition, Boorstin suggested that pseudo-events may be blurring the edges of reality, creating a world where planned events are more "real" than reality.

Pseudo-events also tend to spawn more pseudo-events in a geometric progression, said Boorstin, and each new event may have to be more exciting, more dramatic and more interesting than the last to catch the attention of news reporters. Despite the fact most reporters appear interested and cooperative in covering most media events, it is possible they may become jaded from the proliferation of pseudo-events.

Reporters and other persons may also begin to mistrust motives or become more cynical if pseudo-events are over- or mis-used. We may begin to look for what Heilbroner called the "hidden sell": creating situations of reality in which people respond spontaneously to your effort.[5]

To conclude the discussion of Boorstin's pseudo-event concept, I simply ask students to try to recall the last truly spontaneous event in which they participated.

REFERENCES

1. Ed Newman, in NBC's "Land of Hype and Glory," a videotape. Rental information: $37, from University Extension, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720 (415) 642-0460 (item # 10265). We purchased this 30-minute abbreviated version of the hour-long original in 1982 from: Films, Inc., 733 Green Bay Rd., Wilmette, IL 60091 (800) 323-4222 for $275 plus tax (item #322-6177) (3/4" videotape) -- but it is not listed in Film, Inc.'s 1983-84 catalog and a source there says they no longer have it for sale.

2. Daniel J. Boorstin. The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America. New York: Harper and Row. 1964. Chapter I and II. See p. 10.

3. Ibid. See p. 11.

4. Ibid. See p. 11, 12 & 39.

5. Robert L. Heilbroner. "Public Relations: The Invisible Sell," in Leo M. Christenson and Robert O. McWilliams (ed.s) Voice of the People; New York: McGraw Hill. 1962.